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SENATORS CURRIE AND FOREHAND'S SOUTHERN ROOTS LED TO CAREERS IN POLITICS;
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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BODY:

Their lives first intersected in segregated 1950s Greensboro, N.C.

Jennie M. Forehand attended the all-white Woman's College of the University of North Carolina. Ulysses Currie worked his way through nearby North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University by cleaning trays in Forehand's school cafeteria for 50 cents an hour, careful as a black man not to make eye contact with the female students.

Now they sit two rows apart in the Maryland Senate. And it is Currie, a sharecropper's son who spent his childhood working the tobacco fields of eastern North Carolina, who is perched in the front row as the powerful chairman of the Budget and Taxation Committee and an aspiring Senate president. Meanwhile, Forehand, an engineer's daughter from Charlotte, has served in the General Assembly for nearly three decades.

The two Democrats have forged a friendship over time largely framed by the social struggles of their Southern youth - and the distance they have come.

While they didn't know each other in Greensboro, they were in school there at the same time - in a city poised to take center stage in the civil rights movement. In 1960, four young black men would change the course of history at a Greensboro lunch counter.

Soft-spoken with a distinctive twinge of a Carolina drawl, Currie and Forehand realized their shared roots while serving in the Maryland House of Delegates; he was elected from Prince George's County in 1986, she from Montgomery County in 1978. They were sworn in together as senators Jan. 11, 1995.

"My whole life growing up was a totally segregated world," Currie, 68, said during a recent interview. "It was

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white-only. It was back of the bus. It was you couldn't go to the bathroom. You couldn't eat in a restaurant."

Forehand, too, said that her generation of Southern women struggled to find their way - in higher education, in the workplace and in government.

"I think women of my age have a lot of stories of discrimination that they've gone through," she said, before turning to Currie and adding, "nothing like what you've gone through."

Currie's mother died when he was 18 months old. He was raised by his father in a house that had no running water or electricity until he was a teenager. He often missed school - classes were held in a one-room building - to work the fields in Whiteville, N.C. It was physical labor that awakened a yearning in him for something more.

"Got to get some learning" was the expression of the day, Currie said.

Still, the curious thing about picking tobacco was that it brought the destitute of all backgrounds together.

"We were all farmers, blacks and whites alike," Currie said. "So there was not the divide. We were all very poor. We called ourselves dirt poor."

Ultimately, Currie used his savings - \$120 he had earned in the fields and during the summers working on the railroad - to cover his enrollment fees and first quarter in Greensboro. He bid his father and sister farewell, and headed off to school. The first in his family to go to college.

Like many Southern cities at the time, Greensboro in the late 1950s was two separate worlds. The colleges were on opposite sides of town, and the only reason a North Carolina A&T State University student would venture to the Women's College was because he worked there.

"Generally people stayed in their place and didn't challenge the system," said Claudette Burroughs-White, a former Greensboro city councilwoman and one of the first black women to attend the Women's College in the late 1950s. The college went co-ed and was renamed the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the early 1960s.

Though they hailed from different circumstances, Currie and Forehand each held jobs while they went to school. Forehand said her parents, raised during the Depression, had instilled in her a valued work ethic. She noted that her mother, a teacher, was unable to work during the country's economic downturn, when jobs were scarce.

Forehand wrote articles about school life to send back to hometown papers. At 35 cents an hour, she was hardly raking in the cash.

But she only worked part time, and Currie worked seven days a week. His weekdays were spent in the cafeteria. Over the weekends, he would wash the dormitory floors at the college.

"Did you have enough time to study, or were there a lot of people in the same situation?" Forehand, 71, asked Currie during a joint interview recently in the Senate lounge in the State House.

Currie said most of his schoolmates worked, and that no, he never did have enough time to study.

"But in order to stay in college, you had to work," Currie said.

Currie said he wasn't part of the burgeoning sit-in movement, which shot to national prominence in February 1960 when four black college students entered the F.W. Woolworth Store on South Elm Street in Greensboro and took their seats at the counter in an all-white section; they weren't served, but their peaceful protest spawned sit-ins around the country. The lunch counters in Woolworth's and other Greensboro stores were desegregated that summer.

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Both he and Forehand, who would receive her bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1958, had graduated by then.

But Currie's appetite for politics was whetted during those formative years, most especially when he saw Martin Luther King Jr. speak in 1958 at nearby Bennett College. To a packed house, King urged attendees to register to vote. The country, he said, needed "leaders of integrity."

"It was the greatest speech I'd ever heard," Currie said.

Currie graduated from A&T in 1959 with a degree in social studies and moved north to Havre de Grace to stay with his aunt, Odessa Phillips, who in the absence of his mother had urged him to pursue his education and find a satisfying career. She subscribed to Ebony magazine so that Currie could see how professional blacks lived.

"My whole life has been as much of a struggle for an education as anything," Currie said. "I still feel that's the gap. Education. Trying to close the gap and catch up."

Upon moving north, he enlisted in the Army and was stationed at Fort Dix, N.J., and later in Germany. He eventually pursued graduate studies in education at American University, from which he received a master's degree in 1968. Currie is married and has two children and two grandchildren.

Forehand, now a mother of two and grandmother of four, married a childhood friend and headed to Maryland as well. She recalls being demoted by her bosses at the National Institutes of Health when her supervisors learned she was pregnant. She remembers also not being able to take out a loan to purchase a car without her husband's signature on the paperwork.

With much talk in the months since the 2006 elections about how the Democratic Party can keep blacks loyal to the cause, Currie and Forehand mused about the political progress that blacks and women have made - and the ground still to cover.

Currie, who has worked as a principal at several Prince George's County schools, said he is interested in replacing Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller when he steps down. And he said Democrats "must do more as a party" in promoting statewide candidates of color.

Still, Currie said he never imagined growing up in Whiteville - today a town of about 5,000 - that he would one day hold public office. He shakes his head when he thinks about how far he has come. Next to him, Forehand says how proud she is of her colleague, resting a hand on his forearm.

"Having arrived here as an African-American with my background is really huge," Currie said.

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GRAPHIC: Photo(s)

1. Sens. Jennie M. Forehand (left) of Montgomery County and Ulysses Currie of Prince George's County reminisce about their college days. Both were students in the 1950s in Greensboro, N.C., during the days of segregation. 2. Sen. Ulysses Currie, a Democrat from Prince George's County, and Sen. Jennie M. Forehand (back ground, left) both attended college in segregated North Carolina before their political careers.

1. Barbara Haddock Taylor : Sun photographer 2. Kim Hairston : Sun photographer

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